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USAID/DDA FOR MARK SILVERMAN

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SUBJECT: BOLIVARIAN VISION FOR ARGENTINE CATARACT PATIENTS

REF: 07 ASUNCION 576

Summary

¶1. Argentines needing cataract surgery are traveling to Bolivia for treatment by Cuban doctors. A leading Buenos Aires newspaper reported that approximately 17,000 Argentine citizens crossed the border for that reason over the past two years, although that figure is likely inflated. The GOA will not allow unlicensed Cuban (or other) doctors to practice here. At the same time, some poorer provinces within Argentina face perennial shortages of specialty medical supplies, spurring the medical migration. We are trying to discover whether the GOA and the Argentine medical community are interested in staunching that patient flow and, if so, what helpful role we can play in that effort. End Summary.

A Medical Migration

¶2. Leading daily La Nacion reported February 4 that 17,000 Argentines have traveled to Bolivia over the past two years for cataract surgery by Cuban doctors under the auspices of the Cuban-Venezuelan Operacion Milagros (Operation Miracle) initiative. According to the article, Argentine NGOs and non-official social services organizations have been scouring underprivileged areas in Argentina for cataract surgery candidates. Once identified, such candidates were then provided with transportation to two sites along the Argentina-Bolivia border (Villazon and Yacuiba, bordering the northern Argentine provinces of Jujuy and Salta, respectively), where three hundred Cuban doctors are reportedly available to perform the necessary surgery.

The Argentine Response

¶3. The Director of International Relations at the Argentine Ministry of Health, Sebastian Tobar, told Emboff that Argentina is unable to confirm the 17,000 patient figure cited in the newspaper account, as no relevant official statistics exist. Still, he strongly disputed the need for Argentine citizens to go elsewhere for cataract care, and made it clear that the Government of Argentina has demonstrated no interest in allowing foreign doctors to perform operations on Argentine soil. Specifically, Tobar said: "As opposed to other countries in the region, Argentina

has not found it expedient to participate in programs whereby Cuban doctors perform surgeries on Argentine territory."

¶4. To support his claim that the GOA meets the cataract-care needs of its citizens, Tobar described his ministry's achievements in the area, beginning with the establishment in 2006 of the National Program of Eye Health and Prevention of Blindness. According to Tobar, that program boasts the following accomplishments:

-- Cooperation pacts signed with 23 of Argentina's 24 provinces.

-- Close coordination with the GOA's indigenous affairs entity, to ensure access and care for Argentina's often economically disadvantaged indigenous population.

-- Government purchase of the expensive intraocular lenses, surgical kits, and other materials necessary for cataract surgery. In the fourteen month period ending in December 2007, the GOA purchased 4,643 lenses and surgically implanted 3,236 of those.

¶5. The Argentine Ophthalmologic Society, which represents many of the approximately 4,500 ophthalmologists licensed to practice in Argentina, also weighed in with Emboff. It was the Society and similar groups whose protests forced the GOA to reject the idea of Cuban doctors operating in Argentina without the proper certifications, according to Society Executive Secretary Maria Ines Kawlucki. Society President Dr. Edgardo Manzitti confirmed to Emboff that ophthalmologists from provinces near Bolivia have complained that patients that would ordinarily be expected to seek treatment within their home provinces are instead crossing the border. Dr. Manzitti blamed a lack of provincial resources (specifically, specialty medical supplies, which he said were always in short supply) and energetic marketing by organizations associated with Operacion Milagros for that phenomenon. Dr. Manzitti stressed that there is no shortage of trained specialists within Argentina.

An Embassy Role?

¶6. Post has watched with interest Embassy Asuncion's partnership (reftel) with a U.S. eye health firm (Alcon) and Paraguayan doctors, whereby the U.S. firm donated intraocular lenses and cataract surgical kits, while Paraguayan doctors contacted by the Embassy used those supplies to provide free cataract operations to needy Paraguayans. We have made initial contacts with both Alcon and the Argentine Ophthalmologic Society with an eye to possibly initiating a similar partnership in Argentina, and will report on developments.

Comment

¶7. No reliable statistics exist concerning the number of cataract operations undertaken each year in Argentina, according to Dr. Manzitti. Still, no expert with whom we spoke -- calls to Operacion Milagros were not returned -- found credible the newspaper's assertion that over 8,000 Argentines per year opt to travel to Bolivia for cataract surgery. That number is likely inflated. It is nonetheless clear that many Argentines are availing themselves of Operacion Milagros's offer of free surgery. We will keep working to determine whether the GOA and the Argentine medical community are interested in staunching that patient flow and, if so, what helpful role we can play in that effort.

WAYNE